April 2011

Dealing with Anger in Children

My son's teacher has called twice in the last month concerned about my 7-year-old's temper outbursts on the playground with classmates. At home I have noticed a change for the worse in how he treats his brother. Should I seek advice from a professional?

Responding to a child's anger can be puzzling, draining and distressing for adults and family members. In fact, one of the major problems in dealing with anger in children is the anger that gets stirred up in adults. It has been said that parents, teachers, counselors and administrators need to remind themselves that many adults were not taught how to deal with anger as a fact of life during childhood. Some adults were led to believe that to be angry was to be bad, and were often made to feel guilty for expressing anger.

Anger is a normal and healthy emotion that everyone experiences. Anger in children is often triggered by frustration. Children may not always grasp the complexities inherent in situations and feel helpless to solve those situations. Helpless and unable to verbalize their feelings, they commonly respond with anger.

The first step toward better management of children's anger is to teach children that anger is normal, and it is acceptable to get angry at times. The task then becomes how to manage anger and channel it toward productive or at least acceptable outlets, and not deny or repress it.

It is important to remember that anger is not the same thing as aggression. Anger is a feeling, while aggression is a behavior. Anger is a temporary emotional state caused by frustration; aggression is often an attempt to hurt a person or to destroy property and is not an appropriate outlet for anger.

One of the most important things parents, teachers or other adults in a child's life can do is help them respect themselves and others so they can be happy in the world. While it takes years of practice, it is a vital process that pays off. Teaching young children to manage anger and talk about feelings can prevent many angry outbursts in teenage years, in adult relationships, and eventually in their own relationships with their children.

The next time your child displays anger:

- Help him calm down and refocus. Tell him to take a deep breath and count to 10. If he is still angry, ask him to count further or count backward from 10 to one.

- Give him alternatives to anger. If a school assignment is too difficult, don't get angry; get help from a parent or teacher.

- Get a hug or give one when you feel angry.

- Sometimes children can't put their anger into words. Give your child some crayons or colored pencils and let him put it on paper. Ask him to draw a picture of what is angering him.

- Go for a walk with him, treat him to a pillow fight or ask him to go outside and run around the house five times fast and offer to talk when he comes back in! Reward your child with your attention when he controls his anger and is ready to talk.

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Childhood anger only becomes problematic when it is suppressed or displayed in a violent, destructive or inappropriate way. Without a proper outlet, anger control issues may cause children to experience headaches, behavioral problems or stress-related illnesses.

A parent should be concerned when:

- Anger in the child becomes severe; he tears up his books and breaks things in the house.

- The child's behavior poses a danger to himself and others.

- Anger in the child is sustained, lasting for an hour or more.

- Teachers have voiced concern over the child's anger and resulting behaviors.

- The child has performed acts of violence against others, such as setting fires or torturing animals.

If you would like to talk to a professional confidentially about your child, call the COMCARE Children's Program at 316-660-7540. COMCARE of Sedgwick County is the licensed Community Mental Health Center for residents of Sedgwick County. Help is available.